CHAPTER 8

Improving practice and effecting change

In this book we have offered important perspectives on the need to talk to children about sex education, especially in an age of HIV/AIDS. We have taken seriously those scholars who advocate consulting pupils, including sociologist Ann Oakley (1994: 25), who asks: 'What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children both as knowers and as actors?' In Chapter 1 we noted that two-thirds of all HIV infections in the world are to be found in sub-Saharan Africa. We also spoke of education as the social vaccine against HIV infection in the absence of a medical cure. Since HIV is primarily sexually transmitted, the pandemic has caused parents, teachers and community workers to reconsider the issue of sex education for children and young people. Young people's risk of HIV infection is heightened in sub-Saharan Africa because of high levels of poverty and low levels of education. This makes effective sex education an even more pressing need. However, given the cultural and religious values operating in these African communities, as well as the cultural understanding of knowledge and the existing relationships between children and adults, sex education is no easy task.

Even without the spectre of AIDS and the influence of culture, sex education has always been a contested arena. Some have argued vehemently that exposure leads to experimentation, whereas others have asserted that knowledge equips young people, empowering them to make informed decisions. Alongside these two views, there is a perspective that advocates strongly for maintaining children's innocence for as long as possible. Yet others, including this study, provide evidence for children's extant and vigilant awareness of a highly sexualised world – and argue that children are at risk if treated as innocents. The data we have collected over the course of two years in Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa suggest that the answers to how we deal with children and sex education lie somewhere between innocence and exposure, and somewhere beyond the usual features of cultural impediments to learning. Before we discuss these, we briefly summarise the findings of our study.

A summary of findings

On young people's sexual knowledges we found that children have wide-ranging and fairly sophisticated knowledge of adults' sexual practices and sexual worlds, such as prostitution, the influence of drugs and alcohol, and rape and prostitution. They observe sexual acts regularly and are well aware of the particular practices in their environs. The young people were primary-aged pupils in this study, so we can assume that this awareness is formulated at a fairly young age. They understand well the consequences of unprotected sex and HIV/AIDS and are keen to avoid them. They want a lot more information and dialogue with adults on sexual matters and HIV/AIDS in particular. Furthermore, they are aware that they cannot share this knowledge with adults. Indeed, adults are often ambivalent and avoid talking to young people honestly and openly about sexual matters and HIV/AIDS.

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On sex education in schools, we found that children want a more interactive and active pedagogy that allows them to engage with their own knowledge and to talk about their lack of knowledge. They are concerned that the information they get is unrealistic and does not reflect the world in which they live. Teachers affirmed what pupils said about current HIV/AIDS education – though there were a few who tried to be open about sexuality. Teachers want to help, but not many are confident or feel well resourced. Teachers articulated numerous challenges to their practice, mostly identifying technical and social issues that impede their complete participation in HIV/AIDS-education delivery. Some are more frightened of engaging in discussions about HIV/AIDS than others. There is a fear in particular of disapproval from parents and community leaders. The school or the practices in school are influenced by the wider community and the dominant attitudes of the community (e.g. religion and cultural practices). Therefore, the school is a mirror of the community in which it is located. There are very different conceptions about the values and approaches that might be effective and which of these should be adopted.

In a later phase of our study, we held dialogues among all three groups of our study participants – children, teachers and community stakeholders. Our theory of change was that the way to shift attitudes and engage with the sexual knowledge of young people might be to share the findings of the data on young people's sexual knowledge and their preferred form of sex education. When we did this, we found that adults (teachers, parents and community leaders) were surprised at and interested in the extent and nature of the young people's knowledge. Community stakeholders, though supportive of HIV/AIDS education in the school, felt that it should be taught within the confines of a protective discourse. Nevertheless, adults were generally willing to engage with the idea of non-naïve young people and that this fact offered a different possibility in terms of sex and HIV/AIDS education. Adults seemed open to the potential for dialogue about HIV/AIDS education for their young people, although some intractable problems remained.

In reflecting on our findings and thinking ahead to how they might influence practice, we have located two important learnings regarding innocence and culture, and their relation to the sex and AIDS education curriculum in school, which we will address in turn.

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Between innocence and exposure/empowerment

In all our primary schools, in all three country sites, we observed indications of children's exposure to sexualised behaviour and sexual activity. Their home and community environments have exposed them to 'live sex'. Children bring these sexual knowledges from home and the community into school – although they frequently leave it at the door of the classroom. The secret sexual lives they know about and live are seldom discussed in the classroom. Instead, they and the adults in their lives (including their teachers) enact an elaborate charade of 'the innocence of childhood' along with a structured and organised way of learning. These public sexual lives that children see and from which they derive everyday knowledge are in sharp contrast to the formal curriculum taught in school. The insulation and boundary between the two is strong and clear. The school context offers factual information and prohibitive and protective discourse which is removed from the pupils' lived experiences. Meanwhile, everyday knowledges provide unfiltered information, from which children could benefit through discussion. In fact, throughout our study children made it clear that they want to make sense of what they see through discussion with trusted adults. Teachers, especially, are the ones with whom they wish to engage and we can hypothesise that this is because of the particular role and relationship teachers have with children, especially in the primary age group. Teachers are seen as being different to parents, especially with regard to education in the sexual domain.

Our data have shown children having a knowledgeable and sophisticated sexual world both in and out of the school – one which they are fully capable of articulating. A protective and repressive discourse does not seem appropriate for these young people. They know about sexual encounters: they see such encounters in buses, bushes, brothels, cemeteries and *keshas*. Some are engaged in sexual activity themselves. Their voices captured in our study show that they would want teachers (and other adults) to engage with these experiences in a comprehensive and interactive way. Arguably, pupils trust their teachers and want to be able to confide in them. How do teachers and parents respond to these implicit and overt requests for change to the way things have always been done?

Joanne Faulkner (2011) talks of how protecting childhood innocence enables adults to keep their own feelings of alienation and powerlessness at bay. It is a way of dealing with our own identity and fears about the world in which we live, together with its dangers and disappointments. As a result, there is an overvaluation of innocence; it is leading to an increasingly secluded and sentimentalised view of the importance of maintaining children as innocent. Faulkner's (2011: 68) analysis draws on philosophical and religious notions in which 'children are prone to impiety and in need of firm authority'. Key to her solution is the need for children to be seen as agents and citizens who can be involved in 'a deliberative, democratic practice' (Faulkner 2011: 76). She further argues that '[c]hildren are as capable as adults of responding to others' views if such views are offered in the spirit of reciprocity' (Faulkner 2011: 76). This we saw in the dialogues as well as in the various other techniques we used in order to elicit children's view on sex education and to interrogate their sexual knowledges.

Perhaps most powerfully, Faulkner (2011: 76) argues that 'involvement in family and community decision making not only empowers children, but also allows them to experience…responsibility…agency and freedom'. This she believes to be a practice 'more rewarding than exercising authority over children and underestimating their capacities…[and makes adults]… less prone to indulge projective fantasies of savages, not quite humans, and innocents in need of protection' (Faulkner 2011: 77). Though speaking in the context of families, Faulkner's vision may easily be extended to a school context. It does mean, however, that more consultation is required in order to ensure that parents and teachers are working towards a common goal and that teachers are not afraid to teach in the way that best serves the interests and needs of children.

Faulkner (2011: 128) concludes by arguing that:

> Teenage desire and our inability to control it heightens adults' sense of vulnerability and helplessness and signals a loss of the sweet refuge from worry and work that childhood innocence is supposed to represent. To move beyond fear and towards more productive ways of coping with adolescents' passage from childhood to adulthood would require an attention to the views of children that is not yet evident in our culture.

In writing from Western perspectives and for Western families, Faulkner's views capture those of the adults in our study. To be sure, parents, teachers and community leaders we encountered displayed varying senses of the helplessness that Faulkner describes. She advocates 'relinquishing our investment in the idea of childhood innocence understood in terms of ignorance and protection' (Faulkner 2011: 126) in order to better serve children through open discussion that will ultimately protect them to a far greater extent than keeping them ignorant or innocent in a world that is far from it.

Of course, it may be argued that different communities have different needs regarding childhood innocence. For example, does the same argument apply in a middle-class community where children are not as exposed to 'live sex' as the young people in our study were? Is there not an argument to be made for protecting children until close to the time when they may need the information, rather

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than unnecessarily burdening them too soon? These are not easy questions to answer, but need to be interrogated in the context of community norms and experiences. Furthermore, in our study we have not differentiated between children who may be extremely protected and naïve and those who are not. Nor have we measured the range of explicit everyday knowledges within a class. It is our analysis that the social context of the community in which the school is located – and from which the children originate – means that children's everyday knowledges are similar. Though we have not tested this assumption empirically, our observations would support such a conclusion.

Everyday knowledges are likely to differ between communities and within a community. Even children who are protected by parents and religious and cultural practices observe the realities in their midst. And irrespective of the environment, these 'open discussions' still come up against cultural impediments. But perhaps these are not as insurmountable as they may first seem.

Beyond cultural impediments to learning

In the course of both our primary and secondary research, we repeatedly encountered teachers' lack of preparation and confidence in teaching sex and HIV/AIDS education in sub-Saharan Africa. For many, the controlling and lecture-led discourses and patterns of interaction seem to arise both from a lack of technical skills (theory, reflection on practice and preparation) and from cultural impediments to learning.

In much of this study we captured the voices of parents, teachers and children as they explained at length, and in some detail, the cultural obstacles to teaching and learning about sex education. Children mentioned how adults rarely spoke of sex, though they were frequently exposed to it in their homes and communities, as well as through media. Grandparents reiterated the cultural taboos in which parents did not speak to children, although there were some adults, such as initiation school teachers, aunts and older siblings, who were mandated to do so (Van der Heijden & Swartz 2010).

These observations also connect to the position adopted by the school in relation to the community, especially with regard to sex and HIV/AIDS education. Again, we saw different positions being adopted. In some cases, the schools perceived their role to be that of change agents leading the way in giving a widely conceived education on HIV/AIDS. In other cases, schools saw themselves as reflections of community attitudes and were fearful of challenging the status quo. In moving beyond these cultural impediments to learning, we must now seek to answer the questions, what sort of support would teachers need to engage in effective, interactive HIV/AIDS education? And what can aid teachers in the perceived clash of expectations between their community and their classroom?

In writing on the relationship between pedagogy and culture, Robin Alexander (1999, 2000) offers a non-ethnocentric way of viewing both questions when he states that 'teaching is an act while pedagogy is both act and discourse…Pedagogy connects the apparently self-contained act of teaching with culture, structure and mechanisms of social control' (Alexander 2000: 540). He highlights a trio of key factors – knowledge, the learner and the teacher – in the relationship between culture and pedagogy. In our study we have learnt a great deal about all three of these, the multiple ways in which they are rooted in culture and the tensions that exist between them.

With regard to knowledge, we have seen first-hand the reliance on formal, factual knowledge and the use of the book as the authoritative source. Teachers told us and showed us the importance of providing an authoritative response. They did so for two reasons – to protect themselves from criticism and because this is the cultural model with which they grew up. There is an overwhelming expectation that

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they will be transmitters of factual and definitive information. The Bernsteinian framework that helped us distinguish vertical from horizontal and everyday from formal was enormously useful in this regard (and will be returned to later).

As for teachers, we have seen their dilemmas very clearly, especially with respect to their preparation and teaching. You cannot teach what you are not confident to teach. And you cannot vary your pedagogy if it is the only transmission model with which you are familiar. Teachers – their selection, preparation and ability – are key to education; in the contexts in which we researched it was clear to see the complexity of their positions and the sociocultural tug of war in which they find themselves. Teachers see and feel the immediate pressures and needs of the pupils – we have evidence of that. But we also see teachers caught up in the silences, stigmas and preconceptions of their culture. They have not been prepared to engage pedagogically in the sort of interaction and learning that the pupils want, namely answering real questions about real-life dilemmas. As a result, they lack confidence and choose not to engage. This suggests that a different sort of training and preparation is needed for teachers in order to equip them adequately to provide sex and AIDS education. Most importantly, consensus through consultation with stakeholders is essential in order for teachers to be given permission to pursue a different kind of education.

With regard to the learner, teachers have a choice to make regarding whether to keep them passive recipients or view them as sexual actors and inhabitants of a complex sexual world. From our data it is clear that children desire to engage in schooling and classroom practice. They showed us the very complex situations with which matters of HIV and sexuality presented them. They also displayed both agency and interpretive ability in making sense of these. Their judgements routinely navigate life-and-death situations. They want to bring these processes, situations and discussions (i.e. their informal knowledge) into school and they have clearly told us that they see teachers as the adults who can inform them and help them engage with this complex world. They want a more dialogic form of pedagogy. They are asking for a hybrid curriculum and for help in negotiating complexity. The adults know about the context to some extent, but are ambivalent and caught in the authoritative transmission model of knowledge that is their cultural and historical model. In our study we have seen that, even in impoverished contexts, children and adults are able to change the status quo, though the inertia to do so is great and sometimes overwhelming.

Finally, Alexander (2000: 27) suggests that opportunities for change to pedagogy and the curriculum are 'vastly increased and enriched if we extend it beyond the boundaries of one school to others, one region to others, one culture to others and one country to others'. The challenges that children and teachers face in the three countries in which we conducted our fieldwork are not unique. In all societies religious, cultural and moral mores are frequently at odds with progressive learner-centred approaches. Innocence is valued all over the world; adulthood is associated with authority. Consultation is necessarily time-consuming and fraught, but demands reflection on practice. Jacob (2009: 313) calls for 'reflective HIV education design' and describes this reflective practice as 'a balancing act':

> Reflective HIV and AIDS education design is an ongoing balancing act; it requires participation by all key stakeholders who have the necessary ownership to achieve a unified goal…Reflective designers of programmes must balance or address many elements. These include culture, religion, access to information and technology, costs, and relevance to local, national, regional, and international contexts.

Both Alexander and Jacob's analyses are essential for changing pedagogy. In concluding this study, we return to Basil Bernstein and the many ways in which he has provided us with analytical lenses and action steps towards changing the way in which sex and AIDS education is approached with children.

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Back to Bernstein and consulting pupils

Throughout this study we have used Bernstein's insights to guide our understandings and interpretations of data. We began with a material interest in understanding how everyday knowledges interacted with formal knowledges. We discovered that with regard to sex and HIV/AIDS education, they seldom did. In Chapter 6 we spoke of 'weakly framed' curricula with regard to the content of sex and AIDS education. For Bernstein, 'framing' is related to the transmission of knowledge through pedagogic practices. Framing refers to where the control lies when communication takes place in a classroom, and 'the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein 1973: 88). According to Bernstein (1990b: 100), 'framing regulates the form of its legitimate message'. Strong framing, therefore, refers to a limited degree of options for the teacher and students; weak framing implies more freedom. It seems appropriate for sex and AIDS education to be weakly framed. It also allows for the incorporation of everyday knowledge into the formal school curriculum.

Another of Bernstein's ideas of relevance here is his distinction between a competence and performance curriculum. In a competence curriculum Bernstein (1996) asserts that the aim is to develop learners' innate competencies. Competence curricula are characterised by integration between subjects and strong links are made between school learning and real life. Knowledge is not imposed from outside, but is instead drawn out and is based on learners' own experiences and everyday knowledge. This focus on learners' own experiences builds confidence. In the context of the skills needed to navigate life in a sexualised world not always safe for children, this confidence is an important contribution to protecting children. This is another way in which children can be protected, and, notably one that does not result in shielding them from important discussions about information they already have. In this respect, protection is not from innocence but from harm. For Bernstein, like Freire, a competence curriculum is concerned with education as an act of emancipation – building competence in children's lives in order to assist them in overcoming their social contexts and situations. The role of a teacher in a competence curriculum is as the facilitator of learning. This is especially important in order to address the fear that teachers face in teaching knowledge that is deemed inappropriate or culturally frowned upon.

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Conclusion

In this study we have offered detailed data about the nature, sources and processes of the knowledges that young people bring into the classroom. We have begun to understand how children acquire their knowledge, what importance is attached to different sources, the ways in which poverty produces specific knowledges and how these knowledges interact with existing curricula and pedagogies. In the main, children know a lot about sex, but are forced to hide this knowledge in the more formal spaces of classroom and home. The most interesting finding is that while children are not keen to experiment with this knowledge, they are curious: what happens if condoms break? How do gay people have sex? How does the virus work?

Throughout, we have argued for a more 'open-ended' pedagogy in which teaching practices are 'participatory, more interactive, adventurous, learner-centred' (Dembélé & Lefoka 2007: 536). We noted that such practices are challenging in sub-Saharan African classrooms not only because of the barriers of inadequate resources and training, but also because of the incongruence between these pedagogies and teachers' views on the nature of knowledge, the purpose of education and the desired relationships between adults and children.

In the course of the two years in which we have sought to consult pupils, teachers and stakeholders, possibly our most important conclusion concerns what happens when these three groups of actors are placed in dialogue with each other. Although all three groups initially repeated their fears and concerns, it became apparent that given enough time and space a new pedagogy and new curricula might be possible.

In all dialogues there was growing consensus that the exercise of consulting pupils was worthwhile. Parents, religious leaders and teachers came to understand that children were sexually aware, but not precocious. Children had to cope and engage with their lived realities and make sense of them, and choose to act in context. They were not waiting for opportunities to experiment, but to talk, discuss and negotiate. They were curious about mechanics and details, opportunities for activism and the experiences of others.

As the dialogues progressed so too did a gradual seriousness of tone. Children, often silent for long periods during the dialogues, grew in confidence as the discussion progressed, and were encouraged to ask questions and participate with adults in a different way. Reflections and questions deepened as the groups began treating this dialogue as meaningful. All participants began to recognise that such an engagement demanded a different attitude and language. Stigmas and embarrassments were addressed and serious interaction between adults and children was modelled.

So we have evidence that suggests these consultations and dialogues can help teachers and pupils engage in the complex sociocultural task of discussing honestly matters of sex and HIV/AIDS. However, a more important question remains unanswered. Is it possible for these dialogues to be recreated in African classrooms in urban and rural areas? During dialogues there was a frank acknowledgement that the meeting was an unusual event and one that needed support and outside facilitation. This was especially critical within the contexts of community and parental fears, taboos and silence.

Based on our data and experiences in both the consultations and dialogues, we are impelled to advocate a weakly framed sex- and AIDS-education curriculum. We see in our data the working models of practice for both schools and classrooms that take seriously the challenges for teachers, pupils and policy-makers. For children, we have seen the complexity of their knowledge and the silence between them and the adults.

We have seen the ways in which adults attempt to perpetuate the myth that young people do not (or ought not to) know anything about the sexual aspects of life. At the same time, we have seen the possibility for adults to be dissuaded of this viewpoint when confronted with evidence to the contrary. We have also shown the sophistication of children's thinking in regard to their lived realities and their desire to be helped to understand what is going on around them. They want a 'hybrid' curriculum – one that is led by teachers but informed by their own experiences. Finally, we have seen very clearly, how schools are uniquely placed as bridges between home, community culture and children. They offer a pathway through the complexity of taboos and fear.

These consultations and dialogues offer a powerful possibility for change and a new form of pedagogy and curriculum. The work for the future very much lies in how to achieve this in a way that is replicable and sustainable.

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